

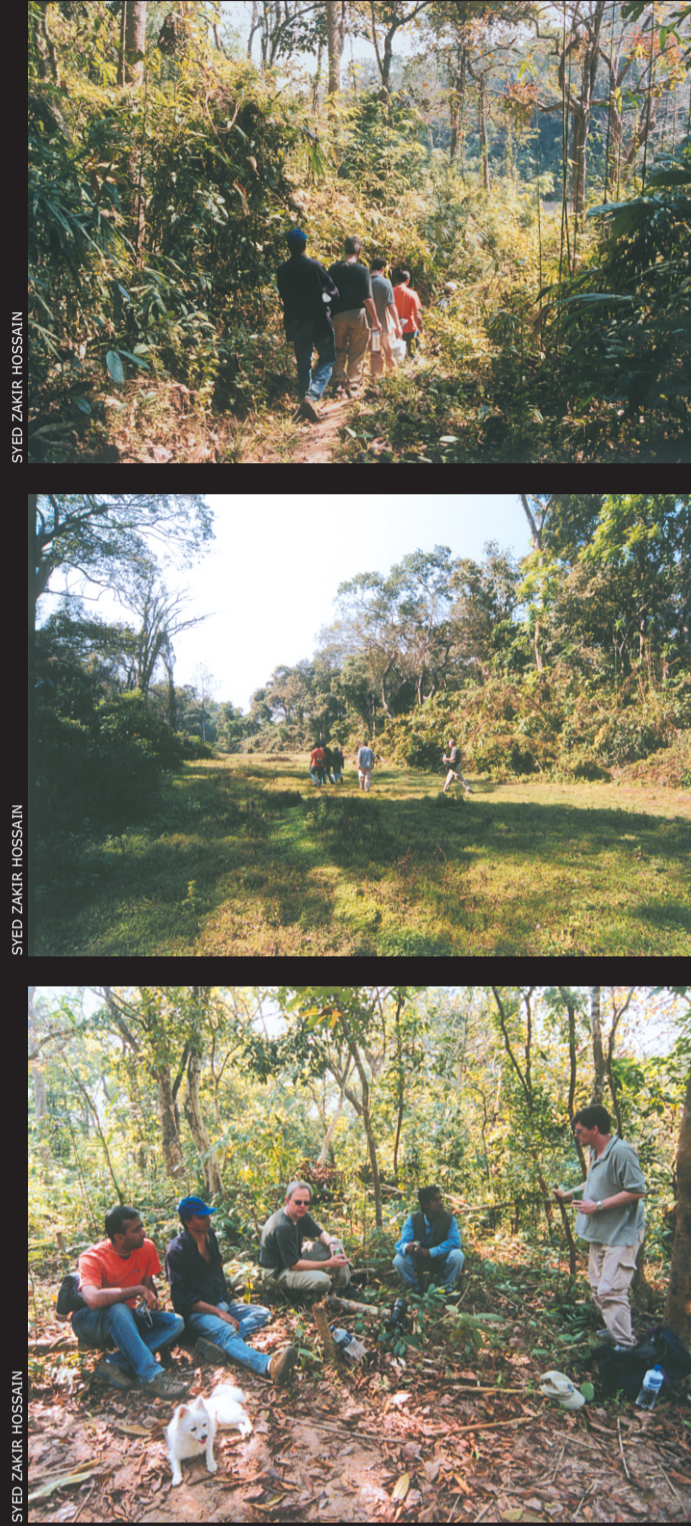
# Star WorldLIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY APRIL 4, 2004

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LOCATION > MOULVI BAZAR CATEGORY > ADVENTURE

## Rendezvous with Rema Kalenga

**fact sheet**

**Position from Dhaka:** Northeast  
**Distance:** Around 260-km  
**Journey time:** 6 hrs (appx)  
**Road condition:** Partially bad



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**T**HE terrain got even more intractable, sometimes taking risky sharp turns. The speedometer remained well below the 10km mark. We climbed slowly and then took the final turn. Ahead was a hillock with a very old quaint bungalow, its mosquito netting falling apart. We stopped by the cabin. It is the oldest forest bungalow in Bangladesh, built way back into the British era. It gives the hill even a lonelier look. We look around. A BDR border outpost is just opposite us. Soldiers with AK47s and Chinese rifles look through gun turrets hemmed by sandbags.

We took our backpack, water bottles, binoculars, camera and set out on foot. We hit a downhill road and came beside the BDR outpost. From there a dirt road runs through the flat plain. We met a few villagers, some of them curiously asked us our destination and looked surprised when they heard our reply.

"Be careful," one of them said. "Don't go deep into the forest. Keep close to the fringe."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Some terrorist outfits across the border sometimes have their camps deep in the forest," he said. "If you run into them, they might take you as hostage."

Now, this is a real problem. But it was still a few weeks before Bandarban hotelier Bablu got kidnapped. So we were not deterred by the warning and walked on.

One kilometer later, we leave the bitumen road and plod through a vast field. Harvest has just been over; the paddy leftovers are still on the field giving that unmistakable sweet intoxicating smell. In the distance, the forest frills the farmland.

Soon the plain land ended and we are faced with the Rama Kalenga forest. A deep olive green canopy of dense foliage blocks vision. We carefully step into the thick undergrowth. In a few minutes, we are on an uphill trip, every step taking us deeper into the forest. The plain land

disappeared from vision and we are all lonely, lonely as one can be.

It is a forest different from any other we have visited. It is not like Lawachhera, which is more organised and pruned; or not like Madhupur, which is now a remnant of a great woodland, or Satchhari which is much smaller in scale or even Laltila. It is a wild forest with thick trees growing high into the sky. The scrubs are so thick that going got extremely difficult. No trails or chhera through it to follow. And vision gets blocked within a few feet.

By some magical fit, Anis led us to some unknown trail. We just followed him like lambs. Our breath became swifter, our legs strained. The earth is covered with a thick mat of fallen leaves, brown and crunchy. The leaves crush under our soles, making loud noise in this solitary jungle. Soon, the trail turned even more treacherous. Often our step falls into holes covered with fine layers of foliage. We tumble with eventual effect of bruises. The next time, we have to climb a steep side of a hill, clutching weeds and shrubs. Often, the shrubs would come loose, sending us into headlong tumbles. We kept our eyes squinted to avoid injury from sharp thorny bushes.

Anis is the only one who walked with agility. And he kept his head high, stopping often to listen to birdcalls. And he did spot some species such as bearded bee-eater and then we saw the prized pigeon of all the imperial green pigeon a very very rare pigeon. Huge in size, almost triple the normal one, it has beautiful emerald green plume. Very soon, we notice another. The male pigeon crooned and his pair responded with a gracious gesture. We watched their frolicking in pure wonder. But then they noticed us, as someone scraped his on the ground, and fluttered away.

We moved on. We know this is the only forest in Bangladesh where you can find the giant

Malayan Squirrel. They are three feet long with fluffy coat. We hoped we would come across one, but Anis said they live deeper into the forest where maybe the terrorists have laid their camps. So we give up the hope and take a rest.

By this time, we are on top of another hill. The forest is not that dense here. We find some fallen logs to sit on and rest. Around us, a myriad of branches crooked in many angles have spawned from tree trunks. We sit in silence and listen to leaves glancing down the trees. An unknown bird whistle in the distance, a lonely tune that suddenly creates a hollow in your heart. A cool breeze blows into our face.

The day is wearing away and we have to move again, this time down a narrow footway. Ringle bamboo thickets block our way and we have to tread carefully in case the sharp-edged leaves cut our face. Suddenly, we stop in the middle. We hear footsteps. Who are they? The terrorists? Suddenly we come face to face with four indigenous Tipras carrying bamboo. They tell us that a few kilometres from here lies a Tipra village and we head for it.

It is a very small village perched on a hillock. By the entrance sits the headman, a very old Tipra, slicing a piece of bamboo. We offer him 'namaskar' and sit. He understands little Bangla and speaks even less. So we walked around the village -- a dozen-house encampment. Piglets lie in peace and snorts. Chickens run. Tipra children look at us with curiosity. A woman mills rice in a traditional grinding hole. In a corner, wine cakes are left to dry on a hanging bamboo mat. They mix it with water to make liquor. Spending time with these easygoing people brings a kind of calm in you. You start hating Dhaka, its opulence, its hedonistic philosophy. You think of the basic. You think of life.

.....  
 .....  
**INAM AHMED**



Tipra headman



Tipra woman



Wine cake

**Budget**

- Microbus fare (7-seater) - Tk 3,000 @ 1,500 per day
- Fuel- Tk 3,000
- Food - Tk 2,000
- Room rent Tk 1,200 (three rooms for one night)
- Total Tk 8,200

**Traveltips**

- Mosquito repellent
- Light-soled shoes
- Sunscreen lotion
- Sun hat
- Sunglasses
- Binoculars
- Flashlight
- Camera gears



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